

Why Bother?

It Won't Happen to Me

By LCdr. Mike Saling

Shortly after I arrived at the Naval Safety Center, I saw an editorial a teacher had written for the local newspaper. She was commenting about the fallout created when 12th-grade students who had failed Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) exam weren't allowed to graduate from high school.

The teacher was rebutting an earlier editorial that tried to hold high-school administrators and teachers accountable for the failures. She suggested that parents and especially students were equally responsible. Teachers and school administrators made tremendous

efforts to provide after-school tutoring, as well as in-school tutoring, in place of elective courses to help those students identified as in danger of not passing their SOL. However, many students apparently refused to attend either option. When questioned, parents indicated they could not make their children attend the tutorials.

That editorial made me think about our efforts here at the Naval Safety Center.

After finishing up a two-year tour as the safety officer on a large-deck amphib, I am intimately familiar with the difficulty in trying to educate naval

Now that I am working at the Naval Safety Center, I have been able to see for myself the tremendous resources that are working for the fleet.



Whether it's teaching pipe-patching techniques during damage-control training...

Navy photo by PHAN Jennifer Nichols



showing how to do CPR...

Navy photo by PHA3 Ramon Preciado

personnel about safety. The proverbial “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” comes to mind.

I have heard the full gamut of excuses for why someone had failed to adhere to safety regulations. Excuses such as “It’s uncomfortable,” “It’s hot,” and “I did not know” quickly come to mind. The blank stare also was all too common. More often than not, the Sailors knew the regulations but chose to ignore them. During those times, I always tried to explain why safety was important in an easy-to-understand, common-sense manner.

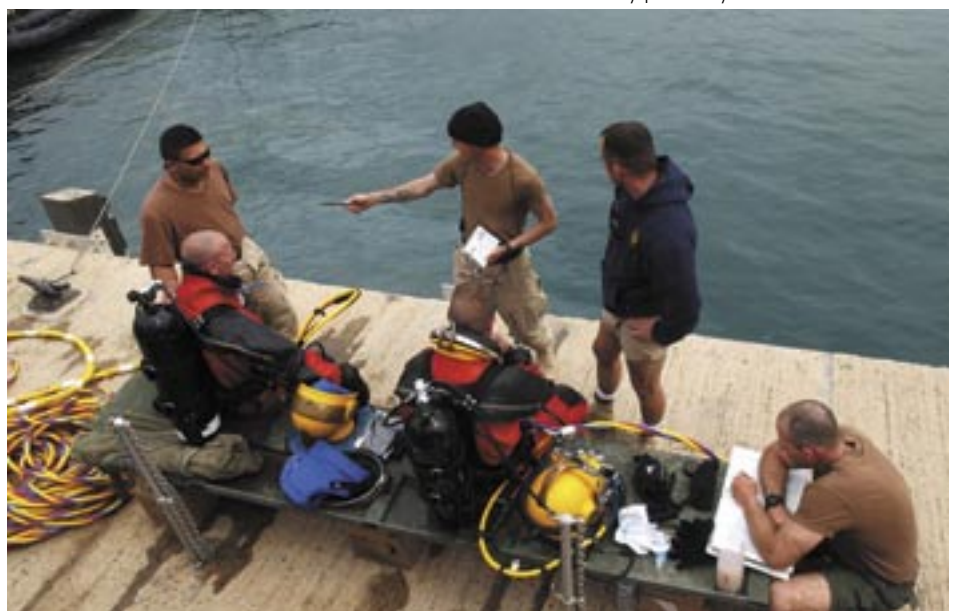
Here are a few examples of my reasoning. On the importance of hearing conservation: “I look forward to hearing my 2-year-old daughter Amelia say, ‘I love you, Daddy’ for many years to come.” Hearing protection is a quick and easy way to ensure I won’t miss those important words. On the importance of sight conservation: “I look forward to seeing my daughter grow up, graduate and get married.” Eye protection can be the

difference between getting to enjoy it for myself or having to hear someone else describe it to me—unless, of course, I have lost my hearing, too. Deaf and blind is not the way I want to live my life.

Safety regulations protect shipmates and us from potential injury or death. It obviously is in our personal best interest to follow the rules. Unfortunately, I have encountered many shipmates who believe that adhering to safety practices and conducting safety training is an inconvenient hindrance in their daily lives. That false sense of security is created when personnel “get away with it” and avoid injury. However, statistics have proven that, in time, other personnel will be exposed to the same hazards. The only thing between them and injury will be whether they are following the proper procedures or using the correct personal protective equipment (PPE).

Now that I am working at the Naval Safety Center, I have been able to see for myself the tremendous resources that are working for the fleet. These resources are similar to the teachers and administrators mentioned at the beginning of this article. Like them, many people have gone to great lengths to provide safety information for the fleet to better prepare each of you for potentially the most

Navy photo by PH1 Ario Abrahamson



briefing a dive team before starting dive operations...

important test of your life. What test? Whether you can avoid or survive a serious mishap through the proper application of risk management, safety regulations, and PPE.

I have known some Sailors with an “if it’s my time, then there is nothing I can do” attitude. They ignore safety procedures and don’t encourage safe working habits in the workplace or while off-duty. We

Navy photo by Deris Jeannette



or leading a class in motorcycle-rider training, many people go to great lengths to prepare fleet Sailors to live safely.

never will be able to avoid random chance or plain old bad luck in our daily lives; however, we should be able to achieve a zero mishap rate among those who actually follow the rules. With proper training and enforcement throughout the chain of command, we shouldn’t lose a single Sailor or Marine because he or she decided to drink and drive, failed to fasten his seat belt, didn’t wear PPE, or made any of the other numerous mistakes mentioned as causes in mishap reports.

Ultimately, the individual Sailor or Marine is responsible for following the rules and will suffer the consequences if he or she doesn’t. During a safety survey, the team leader delivered a set of “fatal vision” goggles to my command. This device allows personnel to experience a simulated level of intoxication ranging from a few beers to an all-out binge.

I personally held safety training with several divisions in the command, using these goggles. The Sailors who participated were attentive and seemed to enjoy the change in how the message against drinking and driving was being delivered. Similar to the students who were given every opportunity to succeed, Sailors on my ship had been shown safety videos, had received direct training from their chain of command, and were issued wallet-sized information cards for the command’s Safe Ride program. Specific traffic-safety training had been conducted four times in the previous six months.

Despite all these efforts, a PO3 decided he could make it to the bowling alley with his friends after consuming four to six beers at a barbecue. The short trip to the bowling alley turned into a two-day stint in the city jail; the petty officer was arrested for drinking and driving with a BAC over the legal limit of 0.08. He had participated in the fatal-vision goggles demonstration only three weeks earlier. His court date still was pending when I left the command, and the petty officer was uncertain what his fate would be.

The active-duty military and DoD civilians who work every day at the Naval Safety Center to help protect you from harm are doing everything they can to educate you—the fleet—on the dangers that exist both on and off duty. The fleet includes the parents (the chain of command) and students (the individual Sailors and Marines) who must take responsibility for their own safety and take advantage of the tutorials readily available from the command, Navy schools, and the Naval Safety Center.

We can lead you to the information that may protect you from harm, but we can’t make you learn the material and adopt it as part of your daily life. Just as the horse surely will die of thirst if he refuses to drink the water to which he’s led, you, too, put yourself at risk if you refuse to incorporate safety into all that you do. As for me, I think I’ll have another glass of water.

